Report of the Task Force on the Review of School Board Boundaries

Submitted to the Honourable Jane Purves,
Minister of Education

February 2000

Honourable Jane Purves, Minister
Department of Education
P. 0. Box 578
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3J 2S9

Dear Minister Purves:

We are pleased to submit to you our report on the Review of School Board Boundaries. We feel the consultation has been an inclusive process and responds to public concerns for input.

We believe strongly that our recommendations provide the best approach to serve our students and use our education dollars wisely. Thank you for the opportunity to lead this important review.

Yours very truly,

Pat Smith, Chair,

Ernie Bolivar, Member

Vicki Brown, Member

Frank MacInnis, Member

Stan Surette, Member

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Executive Summary

Overview

The Government of Nova Scotia made a commitment to undertake a review of school board boundaries with public input into the review process. This commitment was highlighted in the Government's Platform Document *Strong Leadership ... A Clear Course*, and confirmed in the *Speech from the Throne* on October 7, 1999. The goal of this Review was to ensure that the school boards are operating in an effective manner and to make recommendations to improve the structure if appropriate and necessary. The Review was spearheaded by a five-person Task Force.

The Task Force held 25 meetings with all seven school boards, special organizations and the public. Nova Scotians were also invited to submit their opinions to the Task Force, via mail-in guides, e-mail, faxes and a toll-free number.

Highlights

- A total of 485 submissions were received. Approximately 470 people attended the twelve public meetings with about 95 individuals making presentations to the Task Force.

- It appears that the current school board boundaries are serving students well, however, there are a number of issues related to the effectiveness of school board operations that need to be addressed. These include the following:
    - **governance of school boards** including the role and function of school board members, the manner in which the board conducts itself, the division of responsibilities between board members and board staff, the role of School Advisory Councils in relation to the Board and Home and School Association
    - **increased accountability** to ensure that school boards are implementing required policies and programs and an increased focus by the Department on monitoring school board performance
    - **funding for administrative services of school boards** is perceived as being greater than before amalgamation, however, data indicates that regional board management has accounted for a decreasing percentage of the total budget since amalgamation

- **impact of amalgamation on provision of programs and services** has been positive in that more specialized support services and more specialists are now available
- **implementation of other changes to the education system during amalgamation** including major curriculum development initiatives, the special education policy and School Advisory Councils added more stress to the system
- **level of funding** is inadequate and with declining enrolments this problem will be exacerbated in the future
- **communications** are a key contributor to the effectiveness of school board operations and areas of improvement have been identified
- **geographic size** has an impact on communications, however, this may be addressed through new technologies and because board representation is based on population not geography there are concentrations of representation in the more populated areas
- **need for renewed focus on students** and away from the issues of school board size.

It is apparent to the Task Force in listening to public presentations, school board meetings, and education partner organizations and in reviewing the many forms of submissions, that each board is striving to meet its responsibilities under the Education Act to manage the schools within its jurisdiction in a manner that will meet the needs of each and every student. However, there are a range of issues that need to be addressed.

In the view of the Task Force these issues are, for the most part, not directly related to school board boundaries. Even where boundaries are an issue the extra expense of creating a new board was not seen as being in the best interests of educating students. In the body of the Report the Task Force has raised issues that it felt needed to be brought to the attention of government as a result of its deliberations and consultations. The Task Force's recommendations address specific issues related to the Southwest Board, and other issues relating to all school boards including communications, the role of School Advisory Councils and the governance role of school board members.

1.0 Introduction

The Government of Nova Scotia made a commitment to undertake a review of school board boundaries with public input into the review process. This commitment was highlighted in the Government's Platform Document *Strong Leadership ... A Clear Course*, and confirmed in the *Speech from the Throne* on October 7, 1999.

The goal of the Review was to ensure that the boards are operating in an effective manner and to make recommendations to improve the structure if appropriate and necessary. The review was spearheaded by a five-person Task Force. This report presents the findings of the Task Force and makes recommendations to the Minister of Education. The Terms of Reference for the Task Force can be found in Appendix A. Task Force membership can be found in Appendix B.

This report provides a brief history of school board boundaries, the review process, what the Task Force heard, a summary of the key issues, and recommendations.

2.0 A Brief History

Through the 1990s, many changes have occurred within the public education system including school board restructuring, the introduction of School Advisory Councils, and redefined roles and responsibilities for the key partners in education. As well, in 1996, in an effort to increase access to programs and services, improve the effectiveness of programs and services, and achieve administrative efficiencies, the number of school boards in Nova Scotia was reduced from twenty-one plus the Conseil d'école to seven (six Anglophone regional boards and one provincial Francophone Board).

A goal of the amalgamation of school boards was to build on individual board strengths for excellence in programs and educational leadership. At the same time, there was a need to eliminate duplication, to achieve greater cost effectiveness and to put more money into the classroom. Ultimately, it was important to create the best possible climate to support student success.

A new Education Act was proclaimed in January 1996 which incorporated those aspects of the education renewal process requiring legislative support, including the

amalgamation of the school boards, the definition and clarification of roles and responsibilities and the introduction of School Advisory Councils. The amalgamation was completed in August 1996. Now that three years have passed since the amalgamation and the new millennium is upon us, it is an opportune time to review the school board boundaries.

3.0 The Review Process

The Task Force employed a number of mechanisms to obtain input into the review process. A total of 25 meetings were held across the province during the month of January. These included individual meetings with each of the seven school boards, six meetings with individual organizations (Nova Scotia School Boards Association, Nova Scotia Teachers Union, Federation of Nova Scotia Home and School Associations, Federation of Acadian Parents of Nova Scotia, Association of Nova Scotia Education Administrators and Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities), and 12 public meetings across the province.

In addition to these meetings, other consultation mechanisms were employed. A *Guide for Public Input* was prepared to support public input into the process and was made available on-line, at all Access Nova Scotia sites and through the Nova Scotia Government Bookstore. A toll-free telephone line was established to record comments. A Web site was developed to provide information about the process and meeting schedule, and to receive electronic submissions from members of the public. E-mail and faxing were other methods used to send comments to the Task Force. All of the information received was reviewed by the Task Force.

Figure 1	Meeting Schedule		
Public Meetings			
	January 10 - Berwick	January 18 - Sydney	January 25 - Dartmouth
	January 11 - Meteghan	January 19 - Petit De Grat	January 26 - Truro
	January 12 - Yarmouth	January 20 - Mulgrave	January 27 - Dartmouth
	January 13 - Bridgewater	January 24 - Amherst	January 28 - Inverness
Meetings with Associations and Organizations	January 5 - Nova Scotia School Boards Association January 6 - Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations January 14 - Association of Nova Scotia Education Administrators January 27 - Nova Scotia Teachers Union January 27 - Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities January 27 - Federation of Acadian Parents of Nova Scotia		
School Board Meetings	January 10 - Annapolis Valley Regional School Board January 11 - Conseil scolaire acadien provincial January 12 - Southwest Regional School Board January 18 - Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board January 19 - Strait Regional School Board January 25 - Halifax Regional School Board January 26 - Chignecto-Central Regional School Board		

4.0 What We Heard through Meetings and Submissions

While many of the comments and concerns received through this process were unrelated to the issue of school board boundaries, key messages were received from education stakeholders which are summarized below. Figure 2 provides a tally of the number of submissions received during the consultation process. In addition, reports were received from most of the school boards across the province.

Figure 2 **Submissions Received**

Type	Number	Percent
Guides (hard copy)	271	56%
Phone Calls	11	2%
E-mail	136	28%
Faxes	44	9%
Briefs/Presentations	23	5%
Total	**485**	**100%**

4.1 Public Meetings and Submissions Received

Approximately 470 people attended the twelve public meetings with about 95 individuals presenting to the Task Force, and almost 500 submissions were received. The following presents the results of this input by school board region.

Annapolis Valley Regional School Board

Only a small number of people attended the public meeting in the Annapolis Valley region and few submissions were received. Of the few submissions that were received responses were mixed in regard to the board boundaries. Those who wanted more boundaries indicated that this was because of the large geographic region and the large boards did not service the students or community well.

Cape Breton Victoria Regional School Board

Participation at the public meeting in the Cape Breton-Victoria area was low and there were only a small number of submissions received. Responses to the board boundaries were mixed, some wanted more while others wanted to keep the boundaries the same.

Chignecto-Central Regional School Board

There were very few submissions received from this region. Views were mixed with regard to the question of school board boundaries where some respondents noted the need for more boards and others indicated no changes were needed. Other concerns related to school board operations were highlighted, including the view that the level of administration may be greater than required to serve the population, and that the administration is inaccessible.

Communication was cited as requiring improvement. Several participants noted the difficulty in having their phone messages returned. Some members of the public were not aware of who their board representatives were and others did not feel their concerns were being heard. Respondents from this region also noted the inadequacy of funding for the education system.

Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP)

Three public meetings were held across the province for CSAP. Very few submissions were received. In the public meetings issues raised by those who were served by CSAP were generally not related to the boundary issue, although a few noted dividing the board into three administrative regions. Rather, respondents expressed concerns about the assimilation of Acadian and Francophone students, the need for control over their transportation matters, and the lack of funding available to provide Francophone students with the same level of programs and services as the Anglophone students in the province.

A concern was also raised regarding the timing of school construction; it was felt that having Anglophone schools built prior to Francophone schools was having the consequence of attracting Francophone students to the Anglophone boards, thus contributing to the assimilation of Acadian and Francophone students.

Halifax Regional School Board

Participation at the public meeting in the Halifax Regional School Board area was very low. A number of submissions were received, mostly from one school in the region. Responses from this region were mixed, with some respondents favouring more boards and some favouring the status quo. Some concerns were raised about the large size of the board with suggestions put forward to create more boards to manage the large geographic region and to better serve students and the community.

A funding issue was also highlighted noting the present inequity across the region with the continuation of supplementary funding provided by the former cities of Halifax and Dartmouth prior to the creation of the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Southwest Regional School Board

This board had the largest participation at the public meetings and the greatest percentage of submissions. A number of people, particularly from Lunenburg County, expressed concern with the amalgamated Southwest Regional School Board, citing problems with the size of the board, the amount of time required in traveling by board members and staff, and the administrative costs of this travel. Concerns about the

accessibility of staff and board members were noted, as well as difficulties with public access to board meetings.

It was noted that there is not a sufficiently close community of interest between the east and west parts of the school board which make it difficult for the board to operate effectively. Strained relationships among board members was also highlighted as a concern and an impediment to effective board decision making.

Some respondents felt that the difficulties experienced in this board were not boundary-related but related to the relationships amongst the board members, the lack of funding for public education, and the need for revised roles and responsibilities of the board members versus the board administration. Comments were also heard about the important role of School Advisory Councils.

The majority of people suggested that the board be divided, however, proposals on how it should be divided were many and varied. It was felt that smaller boards could deal with local issues more adequately and provide better services to the students and community. Others suggested that the amalgamated board is new and should be given more time to work effectively.

Strait Regional School Board

There was moderate participation at the public meetings in this board area and a number of submissions were received. Many respondents in submissions indicated their preference for more boards, however, participants at the public meetings focused on concerns and dissatisfaction with the school board for closing schools. Respondents noted a distrust of board members and senior staff, and a general lack of communication by the board. Respondents also indicated that the board appears inflexible in its decision making and unreceptive to their concerns.

4.2 Meetings with Individual School Boards

The Task Force met with each individual school board to hear their views on school board boundaries. Administrative staff were also present and participated at the invitation of the board. The following provides an overview of the key messages from those meetings.

Annapolis Valley Regional School Board

The Annapolis Valley Regional School Board felt that there were no boundary issues and that adjustments should not be made. Over the past few years since amalgamation, the board has focused much effort and attention on defining board leadership and governance matters. The remoteness of Hants West and the amount of time required to travel was noted but board members indicated they continually try to find ways to help manage this challenge.

The Board has been effective in managing its financial resources and achieving equity across the region. The Board feels that amalgamation has generally been a positive experience and that if any changes to the boundaries were proposed at this time the focus would continue to be on governance issues and not on educating students, where the focus should be.

Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board

The Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board did not feel that any changes were required to their school board boundaries. Concerns were expressed that a Task Force was in place to review board boundaries requiring the board to put effort into defending the boundaries currently in existence, thus taking the focus off educating students. A concern was noted that there is only one representative for all of Victoria County. The board has developed a strategic plan and indicated that they work together through the challenges faced by the Board. The absence of stable funding was noted as a concern as it inhibited their ability to undertake long term planning for their region. Despite declining enrolments, the amalgamation of the former school boards has enabled this Board to maintain and, in some cases expand, programs and services.

Chignecto-Central Regional School Board

The Chignecto-Central Regional School Board felt that the board boundaries should not be changed. They did indicate that they would be supportive of boundary changes only if it was shown that there would be an improvement for students. The trusting relationships within the Board that have developed over the past three years were highlighted, as well as the cooperative way in which the Board members work together.

Improvements in the range of services since amalgamation were highlighted. This board, as did many other boards, indicated that amalgamation resulted in parity of contracts which increased the costs to school boards. The Board has been working toward achieving equity and have put a number of avenues in place to improve the lines of communication.

Conseil scolaire acadien provincial

The CSAP wishes to keep its provincial mandate and does not feel there are changes required. Most of the recommendations presented to the Task Force involved their right to govern their own Board and the need to stop the assimilation of their students. In this regard, a primary area of concern is related to not having homogeneous schools of the same quality as the Anglophone schools, and the lack of full control over transportation of students. The need for adequate funding was also a key issue with this board.

Halifax Regional School Board

At the Halifax Regional School Board meeting, most board members indicated that boundary changes were not required, however, a few members proposed dividing the board into two regions, rural and urban. The funding deficit inherited and maintained by this Board since amalgamation was noted along with a plan to eliminate the deficit over the next two years. The board continues to move towards equity in the provision of core services but noted that a major barrier to achieving equity is the supplementary funding provided within the former cities of Halifax and Dartmouth. The board feels that it is unable to operate without this supplementary funding.

Southwest Regional School Board

The members of the Southwest Regional School Board strongly expressed that the amalgamation and other issues faced by the board have created friction within the board and they found it difficult to reach agreement on board matters. They also could not reach agreement on the effectiveness of school board boundaries. While the Chair and the Superintendent of the Southwest Regional School Board felt the amalgamation was positive and should remain intact, the majority of board members disagreed and did not want to remain within this current configuration.

Reasons offered for this stance included the urban versus rural nature of the different communities within the board, differing philosophical approaches and priorities, cultural differences, travel time to attend board meetings and visit schools, and board funding being spread too thin given that many geographic areas within the board are sparsely populated. The difficulties of operating as a board given the diverse range of views among board members was itself cited as a reason for separating the Board.

While equity is being achieved across the region, some members of the Board expressed concern that this equity was being achieved at the expense of programs and services in their area.

The board members appear to be involved in matters beyond the provision of general direction, policy development and leadership. Although all schools within the board have School Advisory Councils, it was noted that there still seems to be a preoccupation in the Board with local school management.

In addition, a concern was expressed about the balance of representation on the Board with seven of the 18 members from Lunenburg County.

Strait Regional School Board

A major concern in the Strait Regional School Board relates to anticipated decreases in student enrolment and the resulting decline in funding to the Board. There is currently some major restructuring of schools through capital construction which will afford the opportunity for the Board to provide a broader range of programs and services to their students. The Board noted that disagreements exist between the Board and members of the public in some of their recent decisions. The public had

expressed dissatisfaction with the process leading to the closure of the schools in their areas.

The Board feels confident that the amalgamation has been successful and they have worked well together in making a number of difficult decisions over the past three years. They do not feel that there should be any adjustments to school board boundaries.

4.3 Meetings with Organizations and Associations

Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA)

The Task Force met with the NSSBA early in the process. While the NSSBA did not take a position on the effectiveness of specific school board boundaries, they focused on issues and changes related to their role since amalgamation. They noted concerns about the lack of adequate funding in the public education system, costs of achieving parity as the salaries move up to the highest common denominator, and the need to allow the education system to stabilize after a period of much change.

Federation of Nova Scotia Home and School Associations

The Federation of Nova Scotia Home and School Associations expressed a clear view that school board boundaries should not change. They felt that any changes in boundaries would take funding and the focus away from the classroom. Based on surveys they conducted they found that parents in some school boards expressed concerns about the lack of communications with their board. Concerns were also expressed about the role of School Advisory Councils versus the role of Home and School Associations.

Association of Nova Scotia Education Administrators (ANSEA)

Education Administrators took the clear stance that the boards are operating effectively and changes should not be made. Again, it was stated that it is too early to determine if changes are required and efforts need to move away from the heavy

emphasis on amalgamation and governance issues to focus on educating our students.

Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU)

The NSTU did not take a stance on the effectiveness of school board boundaries. Rather, they presented a number of factors that would need to be considered if there were boundary changes. These included: the provisions in the Teachers' Provincial Agreement and contractual issues such as successor rights; regional agreements; pedagogical issues, such as funding, enrollment, facilities, geographical size (in terms of its impact on financial and human resources and appropriate involvement of stakeholders), support structures; and communication issues.

Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (UNSM)

The UNSM did not make any recommendations about school board boundaries. The main point of their presentation was that they do not want to be funding public education. While they continue to provide funding they desire to have more input into the decision making process of how this funding is spent. Further, UNSM recommended that the school boards and municipalities share resources to achieve greater cost effectiveness and increased purchasing power.

Federation of Acadian Parents of Nova Scotia (FPANE)

The FPANE focused on issues not related to school board boundaries. They raised concerns regarding equality, construction/renovation of schools, and funding and made recommendations on the re-organization of the CSAP board. They also noted the importance of maintaining their culture and the need for homogeneous schools. Their recommendations focused on reducing the number of board members and creating three administrative regions across the province. FPANE also felt that School Advisory Councils should be more involved in decision making.

5.0 Summary of Key Issues

It appears that the current school board boundaries are serving students well, however, there are a number of issues related to the effectiveness of school board operations which need to be addressed. The following provides a summary of those key findings.

5.1 Governance of school boards

Governance issues were prominent throughout the consultation process. Some boards appear to be grappling with defining their roles and responsibilities better than others, but all boards felt governance was a very important issue.

Moving from smaller school board regions to larger school board regions in 1996 necessitated a change in the role and function of school board members. Although the Education Act, proclaimed in 1996, outlines the general responsibilities and powers of school boards, it does not provide specific direction on the new roles of school board members in these larger school board regions.

In the view of the Task Force, governing in a larger board involves a major paradigm shift in the roles and level of involvement of school board members, the manner in which the board conducts itself and members interact, and the division of responsibilities between the school board members themselves and the board staff to ensure the effectiveness of a larger school board. Being a school board member should not be a full-time job. Distinctions need to be clearly defined and understood between responsibility for general policy direction from the school board and staff responsibility for direct administration, hiring, and policy implementation.

Related to governance was the role of School Advisory Councils (SACs) and their role in contributing to a well-functioning board. The role of SACs in relation to school boards and to Home and School Associations needs to be clearly articulated, understood and supported by all education partners. In some cases, concerns were expressed about the lack of clear venues for School Advisory Councils to provide advice and the advice not being given due consideration in light of their legislated role and function. The Task Force feels that school boards have not fully accepted the role of SACs and must strengthen their efforts in this regard. Improving the

effectiveness of SACs can also serve to support the role of school board members in these larger board regions.

5.2 Accountability

The Minister of Education is responsible for the education of each and every student in Nova Scotia. The Task Force feels that there needs to be increased accountability to ensure that school boards are implementing the required policies and programs and notes a need for an increased focus by the Department on monitoring school board performance.

This issue is also discussed in relation to consistency of policies across all school boards and the provision of programs and services.

5.3 Administrative services of school boards

There is a perception that more funding is directed at school board administration than before amalgamation. The Task Force has reviewed this matter and wish to report that school boards are generally spending less on administration even though demands have increased over that same period.

To further illustrate, the following table summarizes the expenditures made on school board administration prior to amalgamation and for the most recent fiscal year, 1998-99, as well as the 1999-2000 fiscal year budget. Please note the former District School Boards were combined to arrive at the funding amount for regional board management in fiscal year 1994-95.

		($ millions)	
Regional Board Management	**1994-95 actual**	**1998-99 actual**	**1999-2000 budget**
Annapolis Valley RSB	$2.7	$2.2	$2.6
Cape Breton - Victoria RSB	3.5	3.5	3.0
Chignecto - Central RSB	4.1	4.7	3.8
Conseil scolaire acadien provincial*	n/a	2.0	1.9
Halifax RSB	11.2	8.8	7.4
Southwest RSB	3.7	2.6	2.9
Strait RSB	2.4	2.4	2.3
Totals	**$27.6**	**$26.2**	**$23.9**

*There was no provincial Francophone school board prior to the formation of CSAP.

On average, 1994-95 regional board management accounted for 3.6% of the total school board budget. This was reduced to 3.2% of the total budget in 1998-99 and further reduced to 3.0% in 1999-2000.

5.4 Impact of amalgamation on provision of programs and services

Prior to amalgamation a number of the smaller, more rural boards were experiencing difficulty in attracting, funding and maintaining specialized support services, particularly in the areas of speech-language pathology and psychology. Amalgamation has allowed the boards to attract a core of specialists that can work with other specialists in their board to provide on-site and outreach services.

As such, the process for curriculum development and implementation before amalgamation was less efficient and needed more consistency and quality control. A small number of boards developed curriculum parallel with the Department that not only created a duplication of effort but also created confusion among teachers and parents as to the mandated curriculum. Several of the pre-amalgamated school boards did not have personnel dedicated to programs. For that reason, these boards could not ensure or monitor implementation of curriculum. In these boards, if implementation was carried out, it was done at the school level with little support or direction from the board, or required direct support from the Department.

School board amalgamation coincided with the passing of a new Education Act. The Act outlines the responsibilities of key education partners with regard to curriculum development and implementation. At the present time, all curriculum, except for locally-developed courses, is developed by the Department. Locally developed courses can be developed by schools and boards to meet specific student or community needs, however, these courses must now complete a quality assurance process before they can be taught in schools.

All boards now have an organizational structure to manage implementation of curriculum. Boards and the Department work closely to synchronize curriculum development and implementation plans. Boards and the Department have recently begun to bulk purchase learning resources to effect greater efficiencies and reduced costs.

Related to the issue of accountability, the Task Force also notes the capacity of the larger school boards to be more flexible in determining board priorities and direct funding to those areas. For example, some school boards place more emphasis on fine arts and music, while others direct more resources to technological programming. School board amalgamation afforded much greater equity of services. Amalgamation enabled more consistent policy development across boards and a wider range of programming. Also, the opportunity for staff to share teaching methodologies and expertise was noted as a major advantage of the larger school boards.

5.5 Other changes in the education system during amalgamation

It should be highlighted that during the period of amalgamation, a number of other major initiatives were being implemented concurrently. These include major curriculum development initiatives, implementation of the special education policy, and the introduction of School Advisory Councils, to name a few. This created additional stress on the system that may have mistakenly been attributed to amalgamation issues. Many of the school boards noted that without amalgamation they could not have managed these new requirements.

5.6 Financial issues and level of funding

Initially amalgamation cost more than projected largely due to wage parity and severance packages. The new boards are still in their infancy. It is clear to the Task Force that the amalgamated school boards now have much greater purchasing power and are able to achieve greater economies of scale to stretch the education dollar farther. Specific examples were noted by several of the school boards during the consultation. School boards should consider the role of the NSSBA in expanding their joint purchasing power.

At every meeting attended by the Task Force, the issue of inadequate funding for the education system was raised. While amalgamation did result in cost savings, it is felt that higher levels of funding can help to alleviate many of the concerns raised under the guise of being a school board boundary issue. With declining enrolments, this problem will be exacerbated in the future. Generally the distribution of funding appears to be equitable, however, it was noted that more consideration should be given to a funding formula based on programs and services.

In terms of the level of investment in our young people, the Task Force was concerned that Nova Scotia has the second lowest expenditure per student in Canada, only slightly better than Prince Edward Island. This is not acceptable. The recent Report of the Fiscal Management Task Force strongly emphasized the role of learning in an advanced society if our future is to be prosperous. Indeed, it is the primary lever for economic and social development. This cannot be achieved without increasing, or at the very minimum, maintaining our investment in our education system. Years of deficit spending coupled with decreasing federal support cannot be turned around on the backs of our students. Other longer term solutions must be sought.

In addition, the Task Force sought information on the costs of creating a new school board (or de-amalgamating an existing board). The following information was extracted from the 1999-2000 Education Funding Review Work Group (EFRWG) discussions where the issue of regional board management costs was addressed. It was agreed that, based upon where boards were incurring expenses and the demands on the system, that the operation of a school board resulted in expenditures that had both a fixed and variable component. The EFRWG estimated that $1 million was required to cover fixed costs per board and that an additional variable expenditure of $100 per student was required to deliver central services. In addition, the EFRWG recognized that the creation of a school board carried with it certain ongoing governance costs at the board level that were over and above the regional board management costs. The EFRWG estimated that funding of $30,000 per elected board member was required to provide for the cost of board governance.

For example, it is estimated that a school board with 10,000 students and 10 board members, would result in an ongoing additional expenditure of $2.3 million if a new board were created. It is important to note that these costs do not include any one time costs associated with the creation of a board such as human resources realignment or facility changes.

5.7 Communications

Communications was often noted as a key contributor to the effectiveness of school board operations. The Task Force identified four areas for improvement required in this area. Well-articulated and regular communications with the public being served are key factors in an effective school board operation. Not only is it important that the primary education stakeholders are knowledgeable about the activities and major initiatives of the board, opportunities to have input into priority setting activities is essential. For example, strengthening communications activities is critical when a school board is making key decisions affecting communities, such as school closures or school site selection. Improvements in this area are required to ensure that people have an opportunity to provide input into decisions that affect them and their children, and that their input is given due consideration.

One of the key vehicles for a member of the public to have input and voice concerns is through their school board representative. Constituents need to know who represents them and how those individuals can be contacted. The Nova Scotia School Boards Association could play a significant role in enhancing communications to the public.

Parents and community members have expressed concerns about not being able to reach appropriate school board staff to have their issues or concerns addressed. There also appears to be frustration due to a lack of information about responsibilities and the lack of support people in the newly amalgamated, larger boards. This requires a major communication effort to develop an understanding of the roles and functions of school board members, the Department, school board administrative staff and staff in their local schools. Without this knowledge and understanding, the public's frustration will build and their concerns will become exacerbated without resolution. School board members will be faced with trying to respond to issues outside of the scope of their responsibility when these matters should actually be addressed at the school level.

Communications technology, internet capability and video/audio conferencing offer new ways of interacting and working together that can help to overcome limitations of time, distance and geography. In larger boards, it is essential to employ a variety of communication mechanisms to support the operations of the boards and the business of school board members and their staff.

Finally, it is recognized that stronger liaison between elected school board members and elected municipal council members would help to build relationships for the betterment of children. School board members and municipal councillors are urged to find better ways to communicate with each other.

5.8 Geographic size

The size of the geographic area of the school board regions has raised concerns in the larger boards. There is a perception that the distance and the travel time inhibits communication. The Task Force has noted with interest the capacity of new technologies and how they are currently being used in some school boards to alleviate the geographic difficulties of larger boards with remote locations and long traveling distances. School boards continue to focus on ways to overcome the challenge of geographic size.

The geographic size of the board also impacts on board representation. The number of board members is determined by population, not geography, as determined by the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board. Consequently, the larger the population, the more representation. This has added more travel time in the larger geographic areas and has created concentrations of representation in the more populated areas.

5.9 Renewed focus on students

In terms of weighing all of the evidence, it is the view of the Task Force that school board boundaries should remain unchanged. It has only been three years since amalgamation. Much time has been spent on contract parity and administrative matters, now it is time to get on with the business of educating our children. School board members and staff, School Advisory Councils, and Home and School Associations have a responsibility to work together in a trusting and respectful environment for the betterment of children.

While the Task Force heard support for smaller school boards and strong local representation, many respondents noted that they did not want more school boards at the expense of funding for the classroom. If it was going to cost more to have more school boards then school board boundaries should remain unchanged.

6.0 Recommendations

It became apparent to the Task Force in listening to public presentations, school boards and education partner organizations, as well as through written and telephone submissions, that each board is striving to meet its responsibilities under the Education Act to manage the schools within its jurisdiction in a manner that will meet the needs of each and every student.

While sharing this common purpose, it was also apparent that each board is a unique entity, each having specific opportunities and challenges based upon differing communities of interest, geography and student demographics. The recommendations that follow are in the context of enabling the public education system in Nova Scotia to better address these challenges.

In analyzing the information presented to the Task Force, several recurring themes were identified which have been included in the Key Issues component of this report. While recognizing the importance of each of these issues, the Task Force has concluded that these are not directly related to the geographic boundary of the school board.

Related to the matter of school board boundaries, the following recommendations are provided:

Recommendation 1

Each of the school board boundaries should remain as presently established.

The Task Force was made aware that the costs of amalgamation, such as those related to wage parity across the new regions and severance pay, have already been borne by the boards. A change to school boards would again result in additional costs with no offsetting financial savings. This would mean the loss of dollars that would otherwise go to directly support student learning. The Task Force also believes that, despite the unique issues in each of the boards, the boards are still relatively new entities requiring more time to fully realize their economies of scale.

Recommendation 2

In the Southwest Regional School Board, it is recommended that a pilot project be implemented in the region whereby the elected board be replaced by a site-based management model, commencing November 2000.

The Task Force recognizes that the present elected board in the Southwest Region should be taking a broader regional perspective in its decision-making. Because of this lack of perspective, the Board has been unable to provide the governance necessary to benefit all the students within the region. The recommended pilot will facilitate local input and reduce travel requirements.

The Task Force, in its deliberations, discussed other remedies to the governance problem in the Southwest Regional School Board. One was the establishment of a pilot project that would see a Board composed of two appointed members from each of the five counties. This is not recommended as it would not address the fundamental problem of access to board members and extensive travel requirements.

Another consideration was the division of the Southwest Regional School Board into two boards. This was not considered a preferred option due to the inability to achieve economies of scale because of the relatively small number of students and the costs involved with creating another administrative structure. It is the belief of the Task Force that splitting the Board would not be suitable as boundaries themselves are not viewed by the Task Force as the root cause of problems experienced by the Southwest Board, and given the costs involved in a change in boundaries and more school boards, it is ultimately not in the best interest of students.

6.1 Other Recommendations

With regard to all school boards, the Task Force heard time and again concerns related to public access to board members and/or board staff, and concerns related to communications both within boards and between the boards and its public. While not specifically within their mandate, the Task Force felt it should address these issues as part of the report. In the context of enabling school boards to deal more effectively with access and communication issues, the following recommendations are put forward:

Recommendation 3

That the Department of Education and the School Boards explore other communication approaches to help curb administrative costs and reduce travel time.

Recommendation 4

That the School Boards put into practice communication strategies and develop public access protocols. This would include the identification of school board members, the geographic areas they represent, senior administrative staff and their areas of responsibility. The protocol would also include the procedures for accessing the appropriate staff member and would contain assurances that public inquiries receive appropriate responses within a reasonable time frame.

With respect to school board governance, the Task Force recommends the following:

Recommendation 5

That the Department of Education work with School Boards to strengthen the role of School Advisory Councils (SACs) by putting in place a mechanism by which SACs can provide advice to the School Board on matters affecting their individual school, and ensure that the School Board will take that advice into consideration in its decision making as well as support School Advisory Councils in their role.

Recommendation 6

That the Department of Education work with the Nova Scotia School Boards Association to encourage every school board member to participate in learning opportunities related specifically to the role of school board members and the role of school board administration (in a larger school board) in the governance and management of public education in Nova Scotia.

7.0 Concluding Statement

The task set before us has been challenging. The decision to amalgamate school boards has served our students well. The Task Force recognizes that the change over the last three years has been difficult for all school boards. The transition process involved building new relationships, developing trust and understanding of differing needs across each amalgamated school board, and learning how to do things differently. The school boards are responsible for all students within their region, ensuring equity of service and access to programming to enable success for all. These are the critical success factors in the transition to the larger board model.

The Task Force feels these recommendations will help to move the focus back to educating students.

Appendices

Appendix A

Mandate and Terms of Reference
Task Force on the Review of School Board Boundaries

Background

In September of 1995, after extensive consultation across the province, a new school board structure was announced. The new structure resulted in the amalgamation of the 22 school boards into six Anglophone regional school boards and one provincial Francophone board. The consultative process also resulted in a redefinition of roles and responsibilities. In January of 1996, a new Education Act was proclaimed which incorporated those aspects of the education renewal process which required legislative support, including the amalgamation of school boards, definition and clarification of roles and responsibilities and introduction of School Advisory Councils.

The amalgamation of school boards was completed in August 1996 with the support of amalgamation coordinators engaged by the Department of Education.

These changes were quite dramatic and brought the school board structure and the roles and responsibilities more in line with current economic and social conditions. These changes have been in effect for three school years.

With the Government's platform document as outlined in *Strong Leadership ... a Clear Course* (p. 7; p. 25) and through the Fall 1999 *Speech from the Throne*, the Government of Nova Scotia has committed to *reviewing existing school board boundaries where prior concerns have been raised over the process for assessing public input.*

This review will be spearheaded by a Task Force.

Task Force Mandate

A five-person Task Force, appointed by the Minister of Education and under the general direction of the Deputy Minister, will conduct a major consultation to review the school board boundaries. The goal of the Review is to ensure that the boards are operating in an effective manner.

Consultations

The Task Force will consult with Nova Scotians across the province. The Task Force members will attend 10 public town-hall style meetings (arranged by the Department of Education), and will hold meetings with each individual school board, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, the Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations, and the Federation of Acadian Parents of Nova Scotia. Nova Scotians will also be invited to provide written or verbal comments - through a toll free number, the Department's Web site, or written submissions. A workbook is being developed to help with soliciting comments.

Deliverables

One member of the Task Force will be appointed Chair and will be responsible for delivering a report to the Minister of Education comprising a summary of the consultative process, key findings and recommendations for improvement within the parameters outlined below.

➢ **Financial**

How effectively does the current school board structure facilitate the embodiment of the principles of equity, adequacy, accountability and responsiveness within the available funding? Does the structure enable the boards to effectively manage changes in enrolment and achieve economies of scale? Given the broad geographic distribution of our students, and the socio-economic circumstances and specialized needs in areas of Nova Scotia, does the current structure help to enhance access to programs and services to meet student needs?

➢ **School Board Programs and Services**

How well has the current school board structure facilitated greater equity in the provision of and access to specialized support for students, such as speech pathology and psychological services, or professional development opportunities for staff, while reducing duplication of effort? Has it enabled more consistent policy development across boards, for example, board-specific policies or negotiated agreements?

➤ **Roles and Responsibilities**

Are the roles and responsibilities as defined in the *Education Act* supported by the current school board structure? With the implementation of School Advisory Councils, are schools and communities benefitting from enhanced levels of community involvement and greater parental input in shaping the education system of Nova Scotia?

➤ **Francophone Governance**

Has the establishment of a province-wide school board further enabled French first-language education to be delivered effectively in Nova Scotia? Does the current structure facilitate the preservation of French language and culture and does it provide the opportunity for the French minority to manage and operate all Acadian and Francophone schools in the province?

Administrative Support

The Department will provide secretariat support to the Task Force throughout the duration of the Review. This includes the organizational and logistical arrangements for the consultation, collection of written and recorded responses, and preparation of summary notes from the public meetings.

Time Frame

The public consultations will take place during the month of January 2000. A written report is to be submitted to the Minister of Education in February 2000. With the school board elections to be held in October 2000, it is prudent and necessary to conclude the Review within this condensed time frame.

Appendix B

Task Force Membership

Pat Smith, Chair
Former President of the Nova Scotia School Boards Association

Ernie Bolivar
Current Mayor of Bridgewater and a former President of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities

Vicki Brown
Former Chair of the Halifax Regional School Board

Frank MacInnis
Former Principal of the Nova Scotia Community College's Strait Campus

Stan Surette
Former Executive Director of the Nova Scotia School Boards Association